

THE DON LEE-COLUMBIA SYSTEM:

By Mike Adams

111 Sutter Street was not the only network broadcast address during the thirties. The other was 1000 Van Ness Avenue, the Don Lee Cadillac Building, headquarters for KFRC and the Don Lee-Columbia Network. It was there that another radio legend was born.

Don Lee was a prominent Los Angeles automobile dealer, who had owned all the Cadillac and LaSalle dealerships in the State of California for over 20 years. After making a substantial fortune in the auto business, he decided to try his hand at broadcasting.¹ In 1926, he purchased KFRC in San Francisco from the City of Paris department store. The following year he bought KHJ in Los Angeles and connected the two stations by telephone line to establish the Don Lee Broadcasting System.

From the beginning, Lee spared no expense to make these two stations among the finest in the nation, as a 1929 article from Broadcast Weekly attests:

Both KHJ and KFRC have large complete staffs of artists, singers and entertainers, with each station having its own Don Lee Symphony Orchestra, dance band and organ, plus all of the musical instruments that can be used successful in broadcasting. It is no idle boast that either KHJ or KFRC could operate continuously without going outside their own staffs for talent, and yet give a variety with an appeal to every type of audience.[2]

In 1929, CBS still had no affiliates west of the Rockies, and this was making it difficult for the network to compete with its larger rival, NBC. CBS president William S. Paley was in need of West Coast affiliates, and he needed them fast. Thus it was that Paley travelled to Los Angeles that summer to convince Don Lee to sign a CBS affiliate agreement. Paley was a busy man, and he was frustrated by Lee's casual, time-consuming ways of doing business. Lee insisted that Paley spend a week with him on his yacht "The Invader" before any business could be discussed. After two lengthy sailings during which Lee had plenty of opportunity to evaluate Paley's moral fiber in the relaxed, informal atmosphere at sea, Lee agreed to sign an affiliate agreement which Paley was to dictate without any negotiation whatsoever. The agreement was immediately executed, and the Don Lee stations became the vanguard of the CBS West Coast invasion on July 16, 1929.[3]

The new chain was called the Don Lee-Columbia Network. Two more stations, KGB San Diego and KDB, Santa Barbara, were purchased by Don Lee and became a part of the network. Also, Lee had been feeding programs to the McClatchy

Newspaper station KMJ in Fresno since 1928, and that station became a CBS affiliate, along with the other McClatchy stations (KFBK Sacramento, KWG Stockton, and KERN Bakersfield). Additionally, four Pacific Northwest stations called the "Columbia Northwest Unit" were added (KOIN, Portland, KOL, Seattle, KVI, Tacoma, and KFPY Spokane).[4]

KFRC and KHJ originated numerous programs for the West Coast network. CBS programs were heard in the early dinner hours, and the Don Lee programs were fed after 8:00 when the eastern programs ceased.[5] Additionally, several of the San Francisco and Los Angeles programs were broadcast nationally by CBS. Many of the most popular KFRC programs became network offerings in this way. Some of the most famous Don Lee-Columbia programs that originated from San Francisco were "Chiffon Jazz", "Salon Moderne" with Bea Bederet, and the "Happy-Go-Lucky Hour" with brothers Al and Cal Pearce, which first debuted in 1929. The latter program was heard nationally on CBS until 1933 when it moved to NBC and became "Al Pearce and His Gang", a radio staple through the 40's. Another early program to originate in San Francisco was "Blue Monday Jambouree", a two hour radio vaudeville extravaganza that became a West Coast sensation. The program was first created in 1927 by Harrison Holliway, KFRC station manager, and was heard nationally on CBS by the end of 1930.[6] It was eventually moved to Los Angeles and became "The Shell Chateau" with Al Jolson.[7]

Perhaps one of the most notable aspects of KFRC and the Don Lee System during this period is the large number of people they graduated to national stardom. Meredith Willson was an unknown flutist when Lee hired him in 1929 to be KFRC's Music Director. Jack Benny's announcer Don Wilson began his radio career at KFRC as a member of the "Piggly-Wiggly Trio" before becoming a member of the announcing staff. Ralph Edwards and Art Van Horn were also announcers; so was Mark Goodson, who had a knack for quiz shows. He had several on the Don Lee Network before he left for New York and teamed up with Bill Todman. Others first heard on the Don Lee System from KFRC were Art Linkletter, Harold Peary, Morey Amsterdam, Merv Griffin and John Nesbitt.[8]

Don Lee died suddenly of heart failure on August 30, 1934, at the age of 53, and Lee's son Tommy became president of the network.[9] This presaged a series of events which completely restructured network broadcasting on the West Coast over the next three years. CBS was apparently becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the structure of its western network. The affiliation between CBS and Don Lee, which had been a convenient mechanism for Paley to add affiliates quickly in 1929, was becoming a source of friction as CBS sought more and more control over its affiliates and programming. Apparently this friction even preceded Lee's death.⁹ In any event, it came to a head March 19, 1936, when CBS consummated its purchase of KNX in

Los Angeles for \$1.25 million. This was the highest price ever paid for a radio station to that time. The acquisition of KNX gave CBS a 50 KW clear channel network-owned facility in an increasingly important market. As mentioned previously, Hollywood-originated programs were becoming highly sought after by the radio public, and KNX would become the springboard for a major CBS West Coast program origination effort.[10] (The network's new studios, Columbia Square in Hollywood, were officially dedicated April 30, 1938.[11])

Of course, the acquisition of KNX by CBS completely destroyed any remaining relationship with the Don Lee network. The purchase meant that KNX would replace KHJ as the CBS affiliate in Los Angeles. KNX had been sharing a number of programs with KSFO in San Francisco, so it was natural as well for the CBS affiliation in the northern city to transfer from KFRC to KSFO. In fact, CBS soon announced it had leased KSFO with a later option to purchase the station outright.[12] (When that deal later fell through, CBS instead purchased KQW in San Jose, which became KCBS.) The entire structure of the Don Lee Network quickly collapsed. The McClatchy stations lost no time in joining with Hearst stations KYA San Francisco and KEHE Los Angeles to form the short-lived California Radio System.[14] The Northwest station group opted to remain with CBS.

As luck would have it, that same year a fledgling eastern network called the "Quality Station Group" had changed its name to the "Mutual Broadcasting System" and was rapidly seeking westward expansion. Tommy Lee contacted Mutual and lost no time in signing an agreement, and the Mutual-Don Lee Network was born. This was how Mutual became the fourth coast-to-coast network, and it also marked the beginning of a new West Coast chain that would continue operation into the fifties. The switch from CBS to Mutual was scheduled for December 29, 1936, the date which marked the expiration of the CBS/Don Lee contract. (In fact, for the last three months of the contract the CBS West Coast programs were produced at KNX and fed to KHJ for transmission to the network.[13]) The stations on the new Mutual network were the four Don Lee-owned stations, plus KFXM San Bernardino, KDON Monterey, KXO El Centro, KPMC Bakersfield, KVOE Santa Ana, and KGDM Stockton.[15] Also joining the network via shortwave hookup were KGMB Honolulu and KHBC Hilo. (A number of Pacific Northwest stations were added the following year.)

These upheavals had a major impact on KFRC as a radio production center. The CBS network feeds from the East had reached the West Coast at San Francisco, and branched north and south from there. This had made KFRC the key CBS West Coast station. But the new Mutual hookup reached the coast in Los Angeles, and KHJ became the key station. In the shake-up that followed these changes, most KFRC performers were either moved to KHJ or left to join other stations or networks. Key

management personnel departed from both stations, including longtime KFRC manager Harrison Holliway who became the manager of KFI.¹² In short, the same forces that had caused the program exodus from San Francisco at NBC were at work within the Don Lee organization, and they occurred over the same period, 1936-1942.

SUMMARY:

Most all network program production had left San Francisco by 1942. After that time, the city still saw some national prominence as the network news center for the war in the Pacific. It was also the programming and transmission headquarters for several short wave stations broadcasting to the Pacific by the Office of War Information (this was part of the genesis of the Voice of America). San Francisco also retained some importance as a facilities control point for the AT&T network. But it would never again see the prominence in broadcasting it experienced during its heyday of the late 1920's and early 1930's.

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